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Risks for the brand of the All-Russian School Olympiad

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Abstract. The All-Russian Olympiad of schoolchildren is a significant pedagogical phenomenon aimed at finding and revealing the talents of schoolchildren. The transitive period of educational modernization, associated with the instability of conditions at the level of economic and political processes in the world, necessitates specialists who are able to work in conditions of uncertainty and think creatively. In Russian pedagogy, great attention is paid to the development of giftedness, the Olympiad movement is a massive social and educational project, in which several million students of Russian schools take part annually. However, lacunae remain in the regulatory documentation and in the context of the implementation of subject school olympiads, which leads to problems and conflicts between participants in intellectual competitions. Thus, the purpose of the study is to analyze the causes of social tension, which lead to a decrease in the importance of the brand of the All-Russian Olympiad. Our study examined the main problem fields, among which it is necessary to highlight the variability of organizational conditions, discrediting the admission system following the results of the state final certification, the lopsided formation of olympiads due to overload with the main subject, as well as the aggressive commercialization of the olympiad movement, dishonest academic practices as well. These systemic risks do not allow to fully realize the educational and educational potential of subject olympiads, lead to the refusal of schoolchildren to participate, in general, reduce confidence in the system of holding olympiads. The theoretical significance of the study is refracted in a comprehensive analysis of a number of significant problems, the understanding of which will allow taking preventive measures and developing a strategic development program. At the practical level, the results can be used by local methodological commissions, educational authorities, schools to analyze their own activities within the framework of these risks, and respond to modern challenges of the olympiad movement.

Keywords: intellectual competitions, subject olympiads, academic test

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ПЕДАГОГИКА

Научная статья

Риски бренда для всероссийской олимпиады школьников

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Аннотация. Всероссийская олимпиада школьников является значимым педагогическим феноменом, направленным на поиск и раскрытие талантов школьников. Транзитивный период модернизации образования, связанный с нестабильностью условий на уровне экономических и политических процессов в мире, обуславливает необходимость в специалистах, которые способны работать в условиях неопределенности и креативно мыслить, создавать новое и творить. В отечественной педагогике большое внимание уделяется вопросам развития одаренности, олимпиадное движение является массовым социально-образовательным проектом, в котором ежегодно принимают участие несколько миллионов учащихся российских школ. Однако остаются лакуны в нормативной документации и в условиях реализации предметных школьных олимпиад, что приводит к возникновению проблем и конфликтов между участниками интеллектуальных состязаний. Таким образом, целью исследования выступает анализ причин социальной напряженности,

которые приводят к снижению значимости бренда всероссийской олимпиады. Были изучены основные проблемные поля, среди которых изменчивость организационных условий, дискредитация системы поступления по итогам государственной итоговой аттестации, односторонность образования олимпиадников вследствие перегруженности основным предметом, а также агрессивная коммерциализация олимпиадного движения, нечестные академические практики. Данные системные риски не позволяют в полной мере реализовать образовательный и воспитательный потенциал предметных олимпиад, приводят к отказу школьников от участия, в целом снижают доверие к системе проведения олимпиад. Теоретическая значимость исследования преломляется в комплексном анализе ряда значимых проблем, понимание которых позволит принять превентивные меры и разработать программу стратегического развития. На практическом уровне результаты могут быть использованы локальными методическими комиссиями, органами управления образования, школами для анализа собственной деятельности в рамках указанных рисков.

Ключевые слова: интеллектуальные состязания, предметные олимпиады, академический тест

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Introduction

The socio-cultural transformation of Russian society and its economic, cultural, educational, etc. institutions in spheres gained in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis (2008–2012) and is presently characterised by susceptibility to global risks, axiological crisis, digitalisation risks, and deepfake technologies. The domestic educational system, with its emphasis on humanitarianism, humanistic values, peacemaking potential, and continuous lifelong professional development, has come to the forefront of the debate concerning the sociocultural problems the Russian Federation faces. In the post-Soviet socio-historical climate, starting from the 1990-s, the didactic novelty of the educational environment in Russian schools has been characterised by the integration of research principles into teaching and their entrenchment [1]; this period has seen the emergence of innovative forms of educational and cognitive activity of schoolchildren, such as academic interviews, project- and research-based activities, creative competitions, and subject Olympiads – all requiring strong competitive skills. Time has shown that the highest creative potential for the development of the student as a person is offered by subject Olympiads that promote their participants' cognitive activity and presence in social, cultural and information spaces, affirm and uphold the principles of free development of the individual, their autonomy and intrinsic worth [2].

The objective of the All-Russian School Olympiad as a pedagogical phenomenon is to identify talented and gifted children who are able to think outside the box and switch between different types of activities with ease. The active, inquisitive mind of such pupils, who are able to operate with complex concepts, carry out factual analysis and construct chains of reasoning, easily copes with tasks presented in a traditional and familiar format. In order to foster creativity, the commissions of task developers design complex, high-level tasks that often surprise even the pedagogical community with their uniqueness and unconventionality [3; 4]. The positive impact of school subject Olympiads on the development of the educational system and educational institutions in the country has manifested itself in an intensive expansion of their 1) scope from high subject-specificity towards functional integration of the

educational process (forging links between instruction, upbringing and personal development); 2) target group, now encompassing students at various educational stages from secondary through to higher and professional education; 3) geography, from municipal to regional and national (“All-Russian”) Olympiads; and, finally, 4) geopolitical reach, from national to international.

The state significance of subject Olympiads is enshrined in Article 77 of the Federal Law No. 273-FZ of 29 December 2012 on Education, according to which the objective of school subject Olympiads is “the identification and development in school pupils of intellectual and creative abilities, aptitude towards physical culture and sports, interest in scientific (scientific research) activities, creative activities; the propaganda of scientific knowledge and creative and sporting achievements”. Thus, the organisation of subject Olympiads provides creative pathways for the development of physical and intellectual skills and fosters an interest in research activity, which has a holistic positive impact on the individual, develops and strengthens their ethical principles and their value system. Intellectual competitions for school students which are held under the joint patronage of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, such as the All-Russian School Olympiad and university Olympiads, attract the attention of teacher and parent communities alike, as successful participation in these projects is rewarded with priority admission to a university course in the relevant subject without any additional examinations. Such practices, on the one hand, motivate school students to study individual subjects in depth, venturing into material covered in 1st and 2nd year of university, as well as into ‘real’ research; on the other hand, they can have negative implications, both for children and for the education system as a whole. The **objective** of this study is to consider potential problems that may arise in the Olympiad movement and negatively affect the brand of the Olympiad in general.

Literature Review

Within the framework of this study, we investigated the normative acts, issued by state bodies, that regulate the conduct of the Olympiads¹. We have paid attention

¹ Приказ Министерства науки и высшего образования Российской Федерации от 30.08.2022 № 828 «Об утверждении

to the work of researchers studying the links between career advisory work carried out by universities and Olympiads held under the joint patronage of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education [5; 6]. A significant share of the articles we studied focuses on the organisation of, and preparation for, the All-Russian School Olympiad [7; 8]. We have analysed the list of Olympiads endorsed by the Russian Council of School Olympiads [9; 10]. A range of articles is devoted to the organisation of high school intellectual competitions that guarantee their winners automatic admission to the university programme of choice or entitle them to preferential consideration [11–13]. A number of academics highlight certain common problems that arise whilst teaching those gen-Z children who are digitally proficient but struggle with issues of a socio-psychological nature precisely because of their excessive immersion in virtual reality; these problems, however, do not hinder successful instruction in this environment [14–16]. Some researchers believe that preparation for olympiads and intellectual competitions form part of the ‘hidden curriculum’ of the educational system [17–20].

Materials and methods

Within the framework of the study, we used theoretical and practical methods, when relying on cultural, systemic, axiological approaches. Among theoretical methods, we highlight the study of scientific literature, generalization, categorization. Among the practical methods, we used observation, a survey of participants in the Olympiad contests, conversations with teachers who take an active part in preparing schoolchildren for trials.

Results

Unstable conditions. Intellectual competitions, unlike the unified system of state examinations, are unpredictable both in terms of the topics examined and the expected or desired performance of the participants. On the ‘frontlines’ of the Olympiad, the aim is to score above a ‘pass’ threshold, as opposed to achieving full marks; at the same time, the rankings in the final protocol of the final stage often depend on external circumstances more than on the participants themselves. In a particularly high-achieving cohort, there is a substantial risk that not even scoring 90% of the marks or above will be sufficient to guarantee victory in the Olympiad. We should also not overlook the inherent subjectivity of some of the criteria used in the evaluating creative texts that means that, in many cases, the opinions of the participants and their mentors categorically differ from those of jury members. In 2019, the participants of the final stage of the All-Russian Olympiad in Literature sought additional legal expertise in court, which received wide publicity and

was covered on the RBC channel. Of course, such incidents lead to increased stress and emotional burnout for participants as they come to realise that the final result can be defined largely by luck and not necessarily by academic merit.

High competition for state-funded university places. In guaranteeing state-funded university places for recipients Olympiad diplomas subject to minimal conditions and restrictions, the state loses the ability to regulate the activity of applicants and their choice of higher educational institution. It is, however, intuitively obvious that university applicants choose their field of study and university by prestige; top-ranking universities such as Moscow State University, MGIMO, Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg State University and KFU, amongst others, are heavily oversubscribed amongst Olympiad diploma holders who are automatically granted a state-funded place. This practice increases the average cut-off USE (Unified State Exam) score required for admission, and it is not uncommon for applicants to have to have scored a total of 390 points across 4 subjects (out of a maximum of 400) in order to be eligible for free tuition on the programme of their choice. This discredits the state examination system by creating an idiosyncratic situations where extremely high exam scores can no longer reliably guarantee an applicant’s admission to the university of their choice to continue their educational trajectory. The apotheosis of this issue was reached in 2020, when, due to the cancellation of the final stages of the All-Russian Olympiad in all subjects amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Education made the decision to issue prize-winner diplomas to all students in their final year of school who had passed the selection process for the final stage without conducting any further alternative assessments. Recall that many universities also organise intellectual competitions independently and allocate state-funded places for their award recipients. Olympiad projects are displacing the USE system from its niche of a reliable tool for university admission, sowing chaos in university admissions reception rooms. Originally conceived as a ‘sieve’ for singling out talented, forward-thinking young people, the Olympiads are now, to some extent, being trivialised towards a standard academic examination.

Basic knowledge gaps in compulsory school subjects, lacking upbringing. It is not uncommon for pupils to hinge all their hopes on an Olympiad diploma, and in doing so, to neglect all fields of study that are irrelevant to the discipline they have chosen to pursue further. As a result, those with a specialism in the natural sciences often graduate school with inadequate knowledge of their first language and history, which prevents them from maturing into a well-rounded person with a strong moral compass. Moreover, increasingly often ‘brain drain’ occurs at the university level, with Olympiad winners leaving Russia to enrol in Master’s degree programmes in Europe or the US and eventually remaining abroad to work and live. International Olympiads are becoming a talent fair frequented by

перечня олимпиад школьников и их уровней на 2022/23 учебный год» [Электронный ресурс] // <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202209300006>. Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации (дата обращения: 02.04.2023); Задания всероссийской олимпиады школьников по английскому языку [Электронный ресурс] // <http://vos.olimpiada.ru/>. Информационный сайт Всероссийской олимпиады (дата обращения: 18.02.2023).

Western educational institutions, headhunting young people with grants and scholarships. It should be noted that the greatest interest in study abroad is expressed by participants of international competitions in the natural sciences, as mathematicians, physicists, chemists, and engineers are near-universally in high demand around the globe. This situation has precedent in recent history; immediately after the collapse of the USSR, against the backdrop of the financial and social crisis, many Russian scientists were forced to emigrate in search of a better life and fairer wages. In modern Russia, the root cause of this issue is found in the shift in the moral values and value systems of the younger generation that arises from the structural problems Russian society is riddled with. The risks of globalisation and digitalisation create a culture where the celebration of Western achievements in research is exalted and exaggerated and all domestic strides in the sciences are diminished, leading to the prevalence of cosmopolitanism and the loss of patriotism in this circle. At the other end of the spectrum, we find philologists and linguists who do not have a strong foundation in mathematics and the social sciences, have little to no grasp of the basic economic theory taught in the school curriculum, and are therefore unable to make rational economic decisions and carve out a career path.

Financial bonuses and commercialisation. As recently as 10 years ago, payment of bonuses to Olympiad winners was handled at the federal level; the payment programme has since been cancelled and, to date, no federal replacement has been implemented. Instead, the tradition of incentivising Olympiad participation and accomplishment with monetary prizes was adopted by the governments of a number of regions, with drastic variation across the country; for instance, in 2022 the monetary value of the bonus paid to winners from Moscow and the Moscow Region was set at 500,000 Russian rubles, in stark contrast with the local living wage of about 15,000 Russian rubles. Other regional governments cannot boast of the same generosity. Undoubtedly, monetary prizes are a good tool of providing assistance to the young intellectual elite as they move along their educational journey and start their careers; however, their impact on the Olympiad movement is still hotly disputed within the teaching community. Those who argue against the existence of such bonuses argue, first of all, that the spirit of intellectual rivalry for the sake of self-realisation and personal development has been lost. In taking on a commercial dimension, school Olympiads begin to be defined and governed by the provision of “educational services”, shifting the onus away from teaching and educating a person. In addition, there are many instances of “Olympiad tourism”, where students relocate in pursuit of financial gain. Thus, some participants of the Olympiad have adopted the strategy of transferring to a Moscow school immediately after the regional stage, which allows them to represent Moscow (affiliation with whose team brings higher prestige and maximises financial returns) rather than

the region where they were actually educated. Another aspect of the negative impact of financial bonuses on education as a whole is the upward trend in the fees charged by private educational institutions and tutors who specialise in Olympiad preparation for their services. We note, unfortunately, that many members of the CSMC (Central Subject-Methodological Commission, Russian abbreviation: ЦИМК) and jury board members across a range of subjects are, year by year, widely publicise their involvement in such commercial educational initiatives, casting a shadow on the brand of the Olympiad as a whole. This limits access to high-quality Olympiad training and restricts its reach to children from financially well-off families, which defeats the core purpose of the Olympiad – to identify and elevate raw talent throughout the whole of the Russian Federation, including economically disadvantaged areas, and not just in major urban centres. An issue that warrants separate discussion is the emergence en masse of so-called “online schools” staffed by yesterday’s Olympiad winners, who, upon gaining university student status, immediately turn to teaching in droves. Without taking away from the entrepreneurial spirit that enables the establishment and the running of such institutions, we would like to raise the question of the quality of the training they provide. Many of these “teachers” do not view teaching as a future career pathway and approach their work for such enterprises as a temporary side gig, adopting a mindset in which holding an Olympiad diploma automatically qualifies them to teach their subject without supplementing it with any pedagogical training. These projects rarely stay in business for longer than a few years, as most of them are shut down by their founders after their university graduation when they enter the career world and land their first full-time job in their chosen profession. It is due to this lack of pedagogical expertise and long-term commitment that the work of student-run schools can hardly be called meaningful. University students’ collaboration with qualified and experienced teachers-trainers to gain experience in teaching can be productive for all parties, but this cannot be said about enterprises where they take the lead.

Dishonest academic practices. The high stakes in the form of academic benefits and financial bonuses fuel various kinds of fraud and ingenious scams, from the sale of unrelated examination material for relatively small amounts of money under the guise of leaking the question papers of upcoming Olympiads, to confirmed cases of leakage of genuine regional and final stage assignments – there have been multiple instances of Olympiad commissions finding real question papers online a few hours in advance of the competition and having to use “spare” kits, printed and distributed to participants at the last minute. In most cases, the usual risks of digitisation were also the main culprits behind such incidents, although we note that participants are often disqualified for attempting to cheat by smuggling reference material or electronic gadgets into the auditorium at the competition.

Discussion and Conclusions

To summarise the above, we emphasise that a thorough, comprehensive analysis of the systemic risks of holding nationwide academic competitions is long overdue, especially given that Olympiads have long been a popular alternative to the USE system in university admissions. Whilst we recognise the important role school subject Olympiads play in developing and shaping the creative competencies of students, it is also our view that ignoring the existing problems and risks is a road that leads to nowhere. The educational system is a living organism in its own right that needs constant reform, elucidation of best practices, and elimination of risks that can undermine the consolidated efforts the state and the teaching community undertake in training and educating the next generations of the intellectual elite that we aim to help Olympiad participants grow into.

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